City's Famous Hotels Now Part of History

Passing of the Knickerbocker and Others Recalls Wealth of Traditions Left by Hostelries Razed Long Ago

ASTOR HOUSE AS IT LOOKED IN 1905

STEVENS HOUSE, ONCE BROADWAY'S BEST HOTEL

METROPOLITAN HOTEL and NIBLO'S GARDEN

By HAMILTON PELTZ.

WHERE are the hotels of yesteryear? The Buckingham, the Holland House, the Knickerbocker and now the Manhattan have been marked for the scrap heap. Within a few months each will be tossed into the discard of those Gotham institutions that were but are not.

There is a grievous mortality rate, it seems, among New York hotels. The insatiable steel skyscraper of commerce ever is seeking its prey, and it will not be denied. Business, in its relentless sweep northward—a movement already centuries old in the magic story of Manhattan's Titan growth from adolescence to manhood—obliterates, one after another, landmarks revered by an earlier decade. It razes them ruthlessly and rears in their places mightier structures, more costly and more amazing commercial palaces. These in turn become rubbish under the scythe of the reaper to make room for yet loftier monuments to Mammon. Every acre of Manhattan soil and rock is more precious than the gold of Ophir. So business must rear its insolent head ever higher above mother earth if the tax collector is to be appeased and if real estate and bolted steel and masonry are to yield a fair increment to investment.

Homes That Have Passed.

The Buckingham, primly conservative, built in the Centennial year, garnished in Victorian elegance of gilded cornices and red brocade, has rounded out more than four decades of eminent respectability. The Holland House had some thirty years of substantial prosperity to its credit before it succumbed last January to the commercial invasion. The Manhattan, though no longer young, was yet virile and handsome. One of the Bowman chain of hotels, it has catered successfully to an element that craved an atmosphere of dignity and quiet.

Fifteen years will cover the career of the Knickerbocker—a short life but a merry one! When it opened its doors it was regarded as New York's last word in pretentious luxury and lavish elegance. Larger, newer, more splendid than the Manhattan, it seemed for the Knickerbocker a far cry to the housewrecker. But the edict is recorded. Any New Yorker, and thousands who hail from other ports, may be pardoned a sigh and a non-alcoholic tear as he contemplates the passing of "Jim" Regan's Forty-second Street Country Club," even though Mr. Volstead long ago robbed of its edge the humor and jollity of Maxfield Parrish's mural Old King Cole, that merry monarch who presided over more than a decade of convivial, not to say bibulous, clinking of glassware in the bright Knickerbocker bar.

And yet what is happening to the Knickerbocker and the Manhattan is what had happened earlier to a score of their beloved prototypes. Neither will be more sincerely mourned than were the Fifth Avenue Hotel, the Hoffman House, Sherry's, the Grand Union, nor, in an earlier day, the Morton House, the old Astor, the Clarendon, the Sinclair, Metropolitan, Stevens House and many others.

Hotels, like men, are mortal. In the demise of some of them one likes to think that, like men, they, too, have souls—an "aura" at least, that survives the process of physical disintegration. However that may be, their characters and their fates are as diverse as those of other mortals. Some, like the Knickerbocker, almost before they have had time to sow their wild oats, are cut down in their beautiful youth, victims of a strenuous pace in a commercial age too insistent for them to withstand. Some, like tired men of business, are eliminated by the sapping forces of competitive rivalry. Others, senile octogenarians like the old Astor House, outlive all their pristine charms. They are rich only in memories; but the Reaper passes them by year after year, or perhaps disfigures and cripples them and leaves a stricken remnant, as a fragment of the old Astor has been left, a doddering, unsightly relic of the past, "sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything."

The Old Astor House.

The old Astor House was a marvel of longevity. Even before it gave up the ghost as a hotel and suffered the indignity of bisection it had survived longer than the three score years and ten of man's Biblical allotment. Then, one day, along came Father Knickerbocker himself. He was digging some rapid transit burrows and he needed elbow room. So, in the vernacular of the room clerk addressing the undesirable guest, he said to the old Astor: "We prefer your room to your company, old chap; please get out quietly." And the octogenarian called for his reckoning, tipped the porter, surrendered his key and checked out.

Fond memories lie buried all along Broadway. Come, let us stroll together up the ancient thoroughfare and through the Lower Fifth avenue, and let us note where Time has laid a heavy hand upon the hostelries of yesteryear.

Shall we start at the Battery? Very well; even before we direct our course up Broadway an ancient brick facade, now in process of reconstruction into stores and offices, looms due east-nor'east. It fronts the approaches to the South Ferry from the corner of Whitehall and South streets. Before its dismantled doors and gaping window frames piles of masonry, litter of brick and mortar and venerable timbers that were imported from South America cumber the curb. They are part of the mortal remains of what for nearly a century was known as the Eastern Hotel—or for a portion of that period as the Great Eastern, in honor of the vast and fatile steamship of that name that was too ambitiously big before her time.

A Haunt of Many Celebrities.

The hotel, which dates back to 1822, was known originally as the Eagle. It was frequented habitually by Commodore Vanderbilt, founder of that family's fortunes, when he became interested in the project of ferrying part of New York's growing populace between Manhattan and Staten Island. Even in much later years, when ferry companies had not yet begun to cater so obligingly to the night life of the city and the last boat for the island left the Battery at half past ten, many a belated young man about town, who in celebrating not wisely but too well had missed the boat, found a welcome haven for a bed and a "nightcap" in the convenient and hospitable Eastern Hotel.

Its floors have resounded to the tread of Robert Fulton, Daniel Webster and P. T. Barnum. Its walls have echoed to the liquid notes of Jenny Lind, "the Swedish nightingale," who lodged there while filling her engagement under the management of Barnum in Castle Garden. One of the traditions is that the great showman, who may have believed that "the public likes to be humbugged," but who was too crafty to let it see itself humbugged transparently, used to store in the Great Eastern's basement his celebrated Cardiff Giant when that monstrosity (deftly constructed of cement) was not actually on exhibition. In its later years the Eastern had become a resort for seafaring men and ferry hands. It was hard hit by prohibition, and many say it stranded "on the bar."

Starting up Broadway, a chasm yawns on the west side, where deep foundations are being laid and huge steel girders are being swung aloft for what is to be the new building of the Cunard Steamship Company (Ltd.). The hole in the ground directly beneath what used to be 27 Broadway is the site of the old Stevens House, which, before the Astor House was erected by John Jacob Astor, was rated as perhaps the best hotel in the city. The structure was older even than the Eastern. It was built in 1812, and during much of its career was contemporary with the famous City Hotel. The elder Delmonico began his New York culinary triumphs in the Stevens and remained there until 1853, when he moved further up town and conducted one of the most famous taverns of his time.

Famed for Beef Soup and Mixed Drinks.

The Stevens was particularly celebrated for its English beef soup and for the cordials and mixed drinks that made its bar an ever popular resort for more than half a century. Aaron Burr is said to have maintained an apartment in the establishment from the time he shot and killed Alexander Hamilton in the duel on Weehawken Heights until his death. In later years it was frequently the New York stopping place of Booker Washington. William Sulzer, one-time Governor of the State, lived there before his marriage.

The Stevens House was a notable landmark during the early period of the metropolis, when the fashionable life of the city centred about Bowling Green and when Bond street was the "uptown" citadel of the aristocracy. During its old age it had fallen sadly from its once high estate and had become a resort too often for "sure thing men," who lured to its bar credulous newly arrived immigrants and fleeced them of their savings.

Still keeping to the West Side, on past old Trinity Church, between Thames and Liberty streets we again tread historic ground. No. 115 Broadway, which is the handsome steel and stone building of the United States Realty Company, stands upon the site of the old City Hotel. It was the first structure in the city to be roofed with slate. Stephen Jenkins, in his book, "The Greatest Street in the World," says:

"Until the opening of the Astor House in 1836 the City Hotel was the most famous in the city, and it did not lose its prestige entirely until 1850, when it was torn down and replaced by a block of stores. The hotel was famous not only for its excellent fare and service but more especially for the banquets that were held there and for the distinguished men who were entertained.

"During the war of 1812, on the 26th day of December of that year, a great banquet, at which 500 gentlemen sat down, was given to the victorious naval commanders, Decatur, Hull and Jones. On May 30, 1832, upon Washington Irving's return from abroad, he was tendered a banquet there with Philip Hone in the chair. On February 18, 1842, during the first visit of Charles Dickens to this country, he was entertained at dinner in the City Hotel with Washington Irving in the chair as toastmaster."

The City Hotel was conducted by Willard & Jennings. It stood on the site of the old Etienne De Lancey mansion, and its immediate predecessors on the same historic ground were known as the Province Arms, and then as Burns's Coffee House, the latter sometimes also designated as the City Arms. Burns's was the headquarters of the famous Sons of Liberty, sworn enemies of the American Tories. The Sons frequently held their meetings in that tavern during the troublous times immediately preceding the American Revolution. It was there these patriots met in 1765 to take measures to nullify the operations of the obnoxious Stamp act. During the British occupation of New York, in 1777, a duel to the death was fought with swords in the garden of the hostelry between Capt. Tollemache of the Royal British Navy and Capt. Pennington of the Cold Stream Guards. The body of Capt. Tollemache, who was killed, was buried in Trinity churchyard.

The Old United States Hotel.

Making a slight digression from Broadway at Fulton street, we come, between Pearl and Water streets, upon the site of the old United States Hotel, which was demolished in 1902. It was another of the ancient survivals. Louis Napoleon, when he was saving himself from starvation by teaching languages in New York, made his home there. Lincoln and Seward in civil war days occupied its rooms more than once. In the more recent years the United States, because of its location, was patronized extensively by Fulton Market men and dealers in the fish trade. Its popularity, even in comparatively modern times, was attested by the fact that an extension built directly from the elevated railroad station platform led into the hotel office, an expedient which was a sort of prototype of the present underground passages connecting many of the great hotels with the subways.

Returning from our little detour and resuming the pilgrimage up Broadway, the immortal Astor House site, on the west side between Vesey and Barclay streets, halts us. One feels here like exclaiming, "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground whereon thou standest is holy ground!" Nothing material remains of the famous edifice except the miserable amputated fragment of its northernmost half, its discolored granite blocks plastered sacrilegiously with placards shouting bargains in clothing. The grand old central portal is no more. This poor dismembered relic of the past is not the Astor House. The Astor House is dead, but its soul goes marching on!

Visualizing the Past.

If you would resurrect the wondrous house of other days close your eyes and visualize the past. The men who used that portal and trod the curving marble steps winding up to the office floor included Andrew Jackson, "Sam" Houston, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln, Nathaniel Hawthrone, Charles Dickens, Gen. Winfield Scott, Edgar Allan Poe and Macready the actor. Rachel, Jennie Lind and many other famous women had been the Astors' guests. From the period of the civil war down to that of President Taft every President of the United States had either slept or dined there at least once. At no other place in the city probably had so many pageants started. In no other had so many important campaigns, political, financial and commercial, been planned and prosecuted, unless in later years in the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

Thurlow Weed, who was the pioneer political boss of the Empire State, had his political headquarters in the Astor House for years. There he met his henchmen in council; there he dictated the politics of his party and hand picked its candidates for office, much as Thomas Collier Platt did later from the old plush covered bench in the Fifth Avenue Amen Corner.

From that solid old granite facade of the Astor Louis Kossuth looked out upon the throng acclaiming him as he made his adieu to America and its people. From those Broadway windows the late King Edward VII., when he was the young Prince of Wales, a curly haired youth, in 1860, smiled upon the multitude and bowed to its cheers. And so did the Grand Duke Alexis later. On the steps leading from office floor to corridor and street Walt Whitman, "the good, gray poet," used to "loaf and invite his soul," as he eyed the virile throng, noted the Broadway buses trundling past and steeped his dreamy imagination in all the vivid life of the young metropolis. And in one of the rooms in the northeastern corner—the severed part of the hotel, which is yet standing—Poe, apostle of a more sombre school, brooded and nursed his weird dreams. There he is said to have planned his story of Marie Roget, which was based upon the tragedy of a New York girl named Mary Rogers.

Opened in 1836.

The Astor House was opened in 1836, upon property on which had stood the residence of John Jacob Astor, and those of two of his neighbors, whom Mr. Astor bought out at liberal terms. The purchase was made in 1830, but the hotel, constructed in the most substantial manner throughout, required several years to finish. When it opened its office register and its wonderful restaurant to the public it was regarded as the marvel of the age. Its rooms and equipment were the acme of elegance. Its interior quadrangle, known to a later generation solely as the rotunda restaurant and lunch room, was laid out originally as an attractive garden, with a fountain playing in its centre.

The Astor House was an expensive establishment, but the high rollers used to think it was "worth it." According to indisputable record, in 1849, it cost $2 a day to live there in a first class room on the American plan—that is, with the thrice a day privilege of selecting food from what was then the choicest and most varied menu in America—$2 a day for only that! And when they went to the Astor House they thought they were "plunging"; they wrote the home folks about it! Alas! *Tempora mutantur et mutamur in illis!*

In 1836, when the house was opened, the New York *Mirror* spoke of it in the superlative degree as "the most commanding edifice ever reared in America except the Capitol at Washington." On November 26, 1840, a wonderful banquet was given there to the Prince de Joinville, and in 1844 occurred the first of the socially celebrated Bachelors' Balls, which was long remembered for its brilliancy.

In later years the quadrangle garden was roofed over, partly with glass, and the result was the establishment of one of the most celebrated of New York restaurants and lunch rooms in "The Rotunda." During the luncheon hours the place always was thronged by eager patrons from downtown business offices. The arrangement in the rotunda was unique. Food was served from steam heated receptacles at a large number of separate counters. Roasts and vegetables were installed at one. From another "Tom" served delicious oysters freshly opened. From a third arose the pleasing effluvia of chicken pates, and—oh, the joys of memory—you could buy two of them, large and juicy and smothered in puree of chicken, for only 35 cents! They were a perfectly adequate lunch. There was no "cover charge," no extra price for bread and butter. In the rotunda lunch room patrons seated themselves upon high stools while being served. Such was the popularity of the cuisine that during the rush hours it was not uncommon to see lines standing three deep behind the rows of stools, patiently or impatiently, awaiting their turn.

The Astor House closed its room register and its big front doors to guests on May 29, 1913. There was the usual "wake" in the course of which nearly everything conveniently portable was carried away as a souvenir by old time habitues of the place. Clerks, porters, chambermaids and waiters who had done duty for the house for half a lifetime wept as they went out reluctantly into a cold world, a world that knew them not save as cogs in the Astor House wheel.

Other Old Timers.

At the northeast corner of Grand street stood the Broadway Hotel. Another of the old timers, it was erected by Abraham Davis earlier than 1810. It was the political headquarters of the Whigs when that party was formed, and there the returns of the elections used to be received. After the election of 1844 the hotel lost prestige and declined in popularity.

Coming to Prince street, we find on the northeast corner an office building which is on the site of the old Metropolitan Hotel. It, too, was a famous institution in its day, not alone for its own intrinsic merits but also for the fact that Niblo's Garden and Theatre were essentially a part of it. All the many dramatic triumphs scored there—and among them perhaps not the least was the original production of that one time startling spectacle, "The Black Crook"—were legitimately part and parcel of the glories of the old Metropolitan. The original place of amusement that stood on this site was known as the Columbia Gardens. James Fenimore Cooper had lived upon the same spot.

The Metropolitan Hotel and Niblo's were built in 1852 and opened on September 1 of that year with a splendid banquet, at which were Senator Stephen A. Douglas and many other distinguished men. The hotel, which was under the management of the Leland brothers, was esteemed one of the finest buildings of its kind in the country. In the exuberance of his descriptive enthusiasm one of the newspaper writers of the day wrote: "It makes one think of the palaces of the Arabian Nights." The property, which had become part of the A. T. Stewart estate, was sold in 1894, hotel and theatre alike giving way before the incursion of business.

Almost opposite the Metropolitan stood the St. Nicholas Hotel, another place of entertainment, which played no inconsiderable part in the New York of its day and generation.

At 721 Broadway, between Washington place and Irving place, stood the old New York Hotel, the second of its name. When it was opened to patronage by S. B. Monnot in 1847 it was thought to have been a hazardous business venture to locate a large hotel "so far up town." But the old New York was destined to enjoy a long tenure of prosperity. It became a favorite resort for Southerners visiting the city, and so remained down to and during the civil war, so much so, in fact, that it was almost constantly under surveillance by the Federal authorities and under the watchful care of the Secret Service.

There were times when it was supposed to be "a nest of Copperheads" and on occasions of patriotic demonstration, as when the Seventh Regiment started for the front, special police details were assigned there to prevent possible breach of the peace. The property, after having passed through various vicissitudes incident to declining years, was sold and the building was demolished in 1895. On the big commercial structure which supplanted it is a bronze tablet commemorative of the past.

The Revere House, which stood at the southeast corner of Broadway and Houston street, was closed within a year of the demolition of the New York.

Broadway Central Still Survives.

But we have passed a house which, though it cannot yet be classed among the hostelries that are dead, nevertheless may not be passed unnoticed in such a reminiscent stroll. On the west side of the street, at 671, and almost opposite Bond street, is the Broadway Central. It is the only public house we have yet encountered of which we may speak in the present rather than the past tense. It is, in fact, the one and only hotel now left on Broadway's active service list between the Battery and Fourteenth street. On this site stood the La Farge House and afterward the Grand Central. It was under the latter name that the hotel attained a worldwide notoriety, in 1872, when Col. Jim Fisk was shot and killed there by Ned Stokes, as the result of jealousies involving their attentions to Josie Mansfield.

As the Broadway Central the hotel in more recent days has become a popular rendezvous for union labor organizations and their leaders. Many a modern strike has been planned within its walls—and some have been compromised or called off from there. When the dashing Chief Croker was at the head of the Fire Department he occupied apartments in the Broadway Central. Often at night he leaped from his bed in response to the clanging of the big alarm gong in his room and leaped into his bright red runabout, pulling on his coat as his driver rushed him up or down Broadway at breakneck speed. The hotel was conveniently close to Fire Department headquarters in Great Jones street.

A Famous Roadhouse.

At the southeast corner of Broadway and Eighth street the Sinclair office building looms aloft to a height of twelve stories, the Irving National Bank occupying the ground floor. This is the site of the famous old Sinclair House. As long ago as 1840 a roadhouse stood there which was celebrated for its toothsome terrapin, its canvasback ducks, its turtle soup, its oyster and tripe stews, no less than for its more plebeian corned beef and cabbage. Fashionable New York used to drive out there—Eighth street was suburban in those days—for its game dinners, its champagne and its mixed drinks.

It was not until 1855 that the merry old roadhouse was sold to Robert Sinclair and became the Sinclair House. He sold it eight years later to A. L. Ashman, under whose management it more than maintained its early favor. The establishment became celebrated for the excellence of its cuisine and for its old vintage wines. One of its habitual patrons was Sam Ward, famous gourmet and *bon vivant*, whose after dinner smile alone was enough to confer fortune upon any host. In memory of his old friend Mr. Ashman made the "Sam Ward" steak one of the most popular dishes on his varied menu and it so continued until the hotel was closed.

In the days when Grover Cleveland still lived in Buffalo and had not yet become a national figure he used to stop at the Sinclair often when in this city. In evidence of his friendship for Ashman an autographed picture, taken when Mr. Cleveland was Governor of New York, hung in the private office of the proprietor. Horace Greeley and William Cullen Bryant, also personal friends of Mine Host, were often in his house and their autographed portraits also graced his walls. Marion Crawford passed much of his time in that immediate vicinity, where he laid the scene of his novel *Katherine Lauderdale*.

The Sinclair House on April 4, 1908, closed its doors at midnight and the key was turned for the first time since the place was opened more than half a century before. Morris Kerr had mixed wonderful drinks and had won hosts of friends behind its old bar for thirty-eight years. Frank Morgan, the lunch counter attendant, had entered service there two years ahead of Kerr. With the exception of the Eastern, the Astor House, the Broadway Central and the St. Denis, the Sinclair was the last of the famous old downtown hotels to surrender.

Where the Chautauqua Idea Started.

The shell, or husk, of the St. Denis still stands on its old time site at the southwest corner of Eleventh street and Broadway, but its windows are grimy, its rooms and halls are deserted. On its exterior, since its sale in 1917, great placards announce that alterations will be made to suit the tenant. It, too, doubtless is destined for stores and offices. In the dingy old yellow shell, built in 1853, there is nothing to suggest the soul of the St Denis, which has fled from it forever. But it also for many years was justly eminent for its cuisine. Its restaurant was thronged in its halycon days by high class, discriminating patrons.

It was there the "Chautauqua idea" was conceived and incubated. The late Bishop John H. Vincent, who died at an old age recently in Chicago, was the father of the original Chautauqua. Lewis Miller, a successful business man of Akron, Ohio, was its financial backer. They two used to meet in New York, dine together in the St. Denis and there discuss plans for the promotion of their Chautauqua hobby.

Later in its long life the St. Denis became somewhat less exclusive. Under the proprietorship of "Larry" Mulligan it became the headquarters of the Tim Sullivan clans of the East Side. But its last manager, for some mysterious reason, cherished the idea that he might attain success at the old stand by running the St. Denis as a strictly prohibition house. He abolished the bar, saved his license charge—and gave up the ghost within a year. Then, as in the case of the Astor House, the doors were closed, the furniture, fittings and equipment were sold and the St. Denis picked up its bag of memories and checked out.

That brings the reminiscent ramblers to the south side of Union Square. From there onward opens the vista of another and later galaxy of hotels that once were great. We cannot do them all justice in a single sunny afternoon. So, if you are not bored or too tired, let us agree to meet right here at Union Square to resume next week our stroll through upper Broadway, with occasional detours into the no longer sacred precincts of Fifth avenue. Until then, au revoir! And let us hope meantime that in the intervening seven days no additional perfectly good hotels may get the bowstring!